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MARX, ENGELS AND THE CRITIQUE OF ACADEMIC LABOR

On the one hand all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour-power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is the expenditure of human labour-power in a special form and with a definite aim, and in this, its character of concrete useful labour, it produces use-values. (Marx, 1976, 137)

Articles in *Workplace* have repeatedly called for increased collective organisation in opposition to a disturbing trajectory in the contemporary university: individual autonomy is decreasing, contractual conditions are worsening, individual mental health issues are rising, and academic work is being intensified, with the greatest pain being felt by those who often lack robust labor protections such as adjunct instructors and other fixed-contract staff. Despite our theoretical advances and concerted practical efforts to resist these conditions, the gains of the 20th century labor movement are diminishing in many countries and the history of the university appears to be on a determinate course. To date, this course is often spoken of in the language of “crisis.”

While crisis may indeed point us toward the contemporary social experience of work and study within the university, we suggest that there is one response to the transformation of the university that has yet to be adequately explored: A thoroughgoing and reflexive critique of academic labor. By this, we mean a *negative critique* of academic labor and its role in the political economy of capitalism; one which focuses on understanding the basic character of ‘labor’ in capitalism as a historically specific social form. Beyond the framework of crisis, what productive, definite social relations are actively resituating the university and its labor within the demands, proliferations, and contradictions of capital? By asking and beginning to answer such a question, we do not intend to overlook the language of crisis and its effects. Rather, the articles gathered here have been collected with the intention of offering substantive reading to those currently working in the contemporary university, as well as those considering a career in higher education.

With the production of this special issue of *Workplace*, we hope to contribute to a negative critique of academic labor that not only helps make such “productive” social relations more transparent, but situates academic labor as an object of critique within the discourse of recent developments in Marxist praxis. To undertake this, we sought papers that acknowledge the foundational work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels for labor theory and engaged closely and critically with the critique of political economy. Marx regarded his discovery of the “dual character” of labor in capitalism (i.e. concrete and abstract) as one of his most important achievements and “the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns.” (Marx, 1996, 51) With this in mind, we sought contributions that employ Marx’s and Engels’

critical categories of labor, value, the commodity, capital, etc. in reflexive ways which illuminate the role and character of academic labor today and how its existing form might be, according to Marx, abolished, transcended and overcome (*aufheben*).

Why a critique of academic labor and not service, creative or industrial labor? Why not the self-employed or, indeed, the unemployed? These forms of work all warrant critical attention too, of course, and we would encourage this research. However, it seems to us that academic labor requires a reflexive, critical focus right now for two reasons:

First, as the articles here show, a single university is likely to contain within it work that appears to have a range of attributes, spanning from pre-capitalist forms of work (i.e. the Guild and models of apprenticeship) to the post-capitalist abundance of an academic commons (i.e. Open Access). Yet, the basis of all forms of *work* in the university, from porter to professor, is the capitalist form of *labor*: wage labor. For those of us who work in universities, it remains essential that we pay critical attention to the types of work that are being undertaken, the conditions of that work, the precarity of work, the intensification of work, the gendering of work, the racism of work, the division of work, and so on. Yet we must distinguish these identity-forming attributes of work that seemingly produce difference and heterogeneity (Neary and Winn, 2016), from the *form* of labor that is the underlying cause of these identities. To put it simply: Work itself is not the problem. Work is a *symptom* of the problem and the problem is capitalist labor. We must avoid mistaking the sociological category of work for the category of labor, which was given a specific critical content by Marx in the late nineteenth century that has not yet been superseded but, more often, forgotten, ignored, misunderstood, or ‘avoided’ (Neary & Dinerstein, 2002, 25). Indeed, in Marx’s own lifetime he worried that the subtlety and significance of his ‘labor theory of value’ would be difficult for others to grasp and because it was so “fundamental to all understanding of the FACTS”¹ and a matter “too decisive for the book [*Capital*]”,² he reworked the presentation of his theory over two decades and three editions of *Capital*.³

A brief summary of the labor theory of value might be helpful at this point: Marx established that commodities in capitalist society are characterized by their *use-value* and their *exchange-value*, and the substance and source of the value of a commodity is human labor, which also has a corresponding dual form: *concrete labor* and *abstract labor*. While concrete labor is any human activity that produces “use-value”, abstract labor is the social reduction of individual concrete labor to a qualitatively homogenous form. Abstract labor is retrospectively quantified in terms of *socially necessary labor time*, which is the time it takes, on average, to produce commodities. As efficiencies in production (e.g. through improved labor techniques and technologies that replace labor) are increased due to the imperative of market competition, the socially necessary labor time to produce commodities is decreased and thus the amount of social labor required in production is reduced, too. Unlike in classical political economy, which argued that individual labor time was the measure of value, socially necessary labor time is a historically dynamic

¹ “The best points in my book are: 1. (this is fundamental to all understanding of the FACTS) the two-fold character of labour according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out in the very First Chapter; 2. the treatment of surplus-value regardless of its particular forms as profit, interest, ground rent, etc.” (Marx, 1987a, 402)

² Engels: “the philistine is not accustomed to this sort of abstract thought and certainly will not cudgel his brains for the sake of the form of value.” (Marx, 1987a, 381)

Marx: “As to the development of the value-form I have and have not followed your advice, in order to behave dialectically in this respect as well; i.e. I have: 1. written an appendix in which I present the same thing as simply and pedagogically as possible, and 2. followed your advice and divided each step in the development into §§, etc. with separate headings. ...Here not merely philistines are concerned but youth eager for knowledge, etc. Besides, the matter is too decisive for the whole book.” (Marx, 1987a, 385)

³ *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) (Chapter 1); *Capital* (1867) 1st German edition (Chapter 1) See Preface, paragraph 3 & 4; *Capital* (1867) 1st German edition (Appendix); *Capital* (1873) 2nd German edition (Chapter 1) See Afterword, paragraph 2.

measure of time (Postone, 1993, 291-298), which occurs “behind the backs of the producers” (Marx, 1976, 135). Marx’s theory therefore asserts that despite an increasing capacity to produce social wealth in the form of use-values, a reduction in the necessary input of human labor results in a corresponding reduction in the production of (exchange) value. This inherent contradiction built into capitalism thus explains the dialectical necessity *and* repulsion of human labor in the pursuit of value. This contradiction is regularly exposed through individual accounts of unemployment and precarious work, as well as periods of widespread socio-economic crisis.

Such is the theory, but what of the method? Early in their partnership, Marx and Engels defined the methodology of ‘historical materialism’ (Marx, 1975; 1987b) and this approach has been recovered and extended in recent decades through ‘form-analysis’ (Bonefeld, 2014). A form-analytic approach is distinct from traditional, ‘worldview’ Marxism, which gradually developed a simplified explanation of class relations and historical progress (Heinrich, 2012, 24-26). The traditional view offers a teleological, transhistorical understanding of historical forces of production that manifest historically specific modes of production. Crucially, such an approach, which characterizes the mainstream of Marxism throughout the 20th century, retains a naturalized, transhistorical view of the category of ‘labor’ and consequently understands it as the *basis* for an emancipatory critique of capitalism, rather than the historically specific *object* of critique. According to the form-analytic approach however, freedom is not equated with the freedom *of* labor, democratically controlling the means of production and distributing its product, but with the *abolition* of labor as a historically specific and structurally constituting social form. It argues that the limits of traditional, worldview Marxism are ultimately expressed in how it understands social domination as *external* to the processes of production (e.g. the exploitation of an alienated proletariat by the property owning capitalist class) rather than *intrinsic* to it. The traditional view sees the primary object of critique as the unjust mode of *distribution* rather than the mode of *production*, which is regarded as the necessary expression of the transhistorical forces of production (Postone, 1993, 4-10). The textual basis of a form-analytic approach is chapter one of volume one of Marx’s *Capital* (Marx, 1976) where the implicit distinction between the historical development of society and Marx’s dialectical presentation of its critical analysis can be found (Bellofiore and Redolfi Riva, 2015).

A form-analytic reading of Marx’s critique of capitalism is significant for contemporary applications of the labor theory of value because it places an emphasis on the *totality* of social processes (economic, political, ideological) and aims to expose the reified categories of economics, which represent the fetishized forms of appearance of social relations (Clarke, 1991, 9). The implications of a value-form analysis on our understanding of *all* social relations under capitalism is profound and provides the theoretical basis, for example, for understanding the labor of both academics and students as qualitatively equivalent and therefore the pedagogic relationship between teacher and student as one between divided labor, mediated by value, engaged with the means of knowledge production (Winn, 2014; 2015b).

Our second reason for pursuing a negative critique of academic labor is that if we are to be faithful to Marx and Engel’s historical materialist method we should also recognize that intellectual thought, ideas and concepts produced by academic work are themselves a product of the capitalist mode of production. If we accept this, it places a direct responsibility on academics to engage in a reflexive critique of our own concept-forming labor. We are mindful of Marx and Engel’s insight that “consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all” (Marx, 1975, 44), and Marx’s later insistence that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” (Marx, 1987b, 263) If we acknowledge that human life has, since the 16th century, been increasingly conditioned by the capitalist mode of production (Wood, 2002), we must seek to understand the epistemological effects of this historically specific form of social relations and the central role of the university and of academic labor in the (re)production of bourgeois thought; both its abstract concepts (e.g. equality, rights, nature, the individual, etc.) and their social, material basis. Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978) referred to this as a process of ‘real abstraction’, by which he argues that conceptual thought has its basis in real social processes, or as Jappe puts it:

The faculty of abstract thinking, of seizing what is common to several objects without being visible in any of them, is not a *given*, a *prius*, as the idealistic conception of thought has always claimed, but is the *result* of the existence of *real abstractions* in the production and reproduction of human life. (Jappe, 2013, 4)

The process of “seizing what is common” or, in other words, the labor of *abstract* thought, which makes commensurate that which is *really* different has, according to Sohn-Rethel, come to dominate and control our lived historical experience, and this process of (re)producing commensurability or equivalence out of difference is rooted in the history of commodity exchange. Sohn-Rethel attempts a remarkable study of the development of abstract thought, where he argues that its origins are to be found in the invention of money as a ‘universal equivalent’ for the exchange of commodities, and that modern scientific theory is “knowledge of nature in commodity form” (1978, 132). Critics of Sohn-Rethel rightly argue that it is a fundamental mistake to locate the basis of real abstraction in commodity exchange rather than the production process (Jappe, 2013). Adopting this essential modification of Sohn-Rethel’s epistemological insight we can determine that abstract thought develops historically with the creeping abstraction of labor into its general, commensurable social form and its ultimate representation in the universal equivalent of money. This has deep and wide-ranging implications,⁴ not least in universities which remain the primary social institution responsible for the production of scientific knowledge. If, as Sohn-Rethel argues, all science today is bourgeois science geared towards the purpose of capital accumulation, the form of academic labor is key to this configuration. We are reminded of this when we are told by policy-makers that higher education is an important ‘engine for economic growth’. With that normative claim, higher education is explicitly tied to national productivity and implicitly defined as a means of commodity production; it is the producer of scientific knowledge and all its labor power and infrastructure is coordinated by a mode of production that functions autonomously on the basis of the real abstraction of academic labor, which occurs automatically, irrespective of its specific, concrete content.

The extent to which academic labor is in fact productive labor is a point taken up here by Szadkowski in his article on the subsumption(s) of academic labor under capital. In this careful and extensive reading of Marx’s work, he reveals how *four* types of subsumption are *simultaneously* at work in higher education. It is well established that Marx identified two types of subsumption: formal subsumption and real subsumption, yet these are often considered to take place historically (i.e. sequentially), with real subsumption replacing formal subsumption. Szadkowski argues persuasively that this is not necessarily the case – that the shifting and overlapping process of subsumption can be analyzed on at least four different levels - and then goes on to introduce two overlooked types of subsumption, which Marx discussed in his notebooks: hybrid and ideal subsumption. Hybrid subsumption provides us with a way of understanding the different ways that financial capital has got a hold on higher education, and also how commercial capital (i.e. monopolistic firms) become entangled in higher education in such a way that universities become subservient to them. Through a careful methodological reconstruction, Szadkowski argues that ideal subsumption takes on a strategic function in the transformation of higher education. This type of subsumption is performed by projecting a framework of capitalist production (i.e. its language, logic, technologies) onto higher education that is implemented despite the activities within the organization or across the sector not yet conforming to the mode of capitalist production (i.e. they are non-profit making).

This peculiar situation whereby academic labor is *idealized* as directly productive and subsequently managed according to profit-seeking technologies of control, yet may not in fact be directly productive

⁴ For example, see Postone (1980), who argues that the epistemological outcomes of commodity fetishism led to the anti-semitism of German National Socialism as a form of anti-capitalism: “a careful examination of the modern anti-Semitic worldview reveals that it is a form of thought in which the rapid development of industrial capitalism with all of its social ramifications is personified and identified as the Jew... In other words, the abstract domination of capital, which – particularly with rapid industrialisation – caught people up in a web of dynamic forces they could not understand, became perceived as the domination of International Jewry.” (1980, 107)

labor, creates schizophrenic institutions and has appalling effects on individuals working in them. When compacted with the techniques of formal, real and hybrid subsumption, it leads to overwork and forms of anxiety among both academics and students. This re-engineering of higher education and its effects/affects is the focus of Hall and Bowles' article on the subsumption of academic labor and the exploitation of anxiety. In their contribution, they establish the policy technologies of higher education reform (e.g. marketization, financialization and casualization), and its effects on individuals in terms of overwork and deteriorating mental health. They then introduce another use of the term 'subsumption' from the field of robotics: 'Subsumption architecture' in navigational programming is a way of controlling the labor of machines so that it "impersonates agency without any capacity for autonomy" and the authors liken this to the way in which academic labor is being re-engineered, re-architected and re-programmed in attempts to make it productive. Having introduced the practice of 'subsumption architecture', they then theorize this through Marx's concepts of subsumption and show how the technologies of formal and real subsumption are expressed simultaneously and correspondingly in overwork and anxiety.

This overwork and anxiety is given further concrete expression in the contribution by Simbürger and Neary, whose research into 'taxi professors' in Chile provides clear evidence of how the exploitative and alienating practices of casualization in higher education produces both intolerable effects on individuals and also a sense of helplessness in the discourses about academic identity. Through a review of the literature on academic labor and academic identity, the authors find that the "biggest challenge for contemporary academics seems to be negotiating their academic identities with interpretations of what constitutes academic work". This is confirmed and expanded on through the findings of a series of interviews with 'taxi professors' in Chile, representing the hourly-paid academics who undertake the majority of teaching in Chilean universities. Simbürger and Neary respond to their findings with a 'critical-practical' response that is theorized through a reading of Marx's labor theory of value and mindful of his support for worker co-operatives. On the basis of this analysis, they argue for a move away from the focus on 'academic identity' to 'academic labor' and it is from this theoretical position that they develop their practical response in the form of 'platform co-operatives' of academic labor.

A defining feature of a co-operative is that it is "a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise." (ICA, 2016) Marx acknowledged the co-operative movement "as one of the transforming forces of the present society based upon class antagonism." (Marx, 1985b, 190) He favored worker co-operatives in particular because they are owned in common by associated labor that hires capital, rather than owned by capitalists who hire labor (Marx, 1991, 571). Whereas co-operative stores "touch but the surface of the present economical system, [a worker co-operative] attacks its groundwork." (Marx, 1985b, 190) Part of the explanatory power of Marx's labor theory of value is that it reveals to us why the expansion of wage labor is a necessary characteristic of the capitalist mode of production. It is enough to say that where wage labor is the form of subsistence for the majority of individuals, capitalism has taken hold. Yet, just as wage labor replaced serf labor which replaced slave labor as the predominant forms of labor (Marx, 1985a, 11), Marx theorized and found empirical evidence in worker co-operatives that the "pauperizing and despotic system of the subordination of labor to capital" would be "superseded by the republican and beneficent system of the association of free and equal producers." (Marx, 1985b, 190) This historical view, combined with his theoretical insight, led Marx to argue that worker co-operatives "show how, at a certain stage of development of the material forces of production, and of the social forms of production corresponding to them, a new mode of production develops and is formed naturally out of the old." (Marx, 1991, 571) Within the historical limits of the 19th c. "prevailing system", worker co-operatives represented the most progressive form of capitalist association where the ownership of, the means of, and the mode of production were *social* and not individually private. Marx is clear that it is only because of the capitalist mode of production that worker co-operatives could develop and the worker co-operative, too, is a transitional form that will "sprout" something new.

In fact, in recent decades a new form of co-operative has emerged that might be considered such a transition. The 'social co-operative' (also called 'solidarity' or 'multi-stakeholder' co-operatives) can be seen as an attempt to overcome the limits of the worker co-operative, in which Marx recognized that

“workers in association become their own capitalist, i.e. they use the means of production to valorize their own labour.” (Marx, 1991, 571) Social co-operatives, on the other hand, suggest that we are now past the progressive point that worker co-operatives reached by reversing the relation between labor and capital because the social co-operative form has extended democratic control and common ownership of capital beyond worker members of the co-operative to include users/consumers and other beneficiaries (which could include representatives of the state/public).

Marx regarded worker co-ops as a *new form of production*, whereas in his lifetime joint-stock firms were the *highest form of capitalist production*. (Hudis, 2012, 179) The limitation of the joint-stock firm is that it only socialized *property* and did nothing to change the relation between capital and labour, whereas worker co-ops turn the capital relation on its head. Yet worker co-ops, because of their single-member character, are still limited by the fact that they are subject to value production through the exchange relation: Workers are producers who require consumers. They do not produce goods and services to directly satisfy their own needs. “In this sense”, writes Hudis, “they still remain within capitalism, even as they contain social relations that point to its possible transcendence.” (180) The question here is whether the ‘social co-operative’ form represents a further progression towards the transcendence of capitalism. A social co-operative, at least in theory, is a form of association owned in common and democratically controlled by *both producer and consumer members*, establishing a *direct* satisfaction of needs between members.

This question is directly relevant to Simbürger and Neary’s critical-practical proposal for platform co-operatives, which as they emerge are experimenting with new forms of multi-stakeholder and ‘produser’ membership. A defining characteristic of platform co-operatives is their concern for solidarity, not simply among one class of members such as workers or consumers but across a range of associations that the Internet has made possible and visible (Scholtz, 2016). As such, Simbürger and Neary offer not only a proposal for transition within the University, but also a timely innovation for the challenge of solidarity in higher education.

Likewise, the question of transition from one mode of production to another is directly relevant to Golumbia’s contribution to this special issue of *Workplace*, through which he provides an extensive critique of Open Access and the often overlooked relationship between intellectual property and academic labor. Golumbia argues that while “Open Access” to the outputs of academic labor appears to be progressive, in fact the mandated abolition of property rights is not accompanied by a corresponding transformation of academic labor. In effect, academic workers are dispossessed and stripped of a source of income. If worker ownership and control is a requisite for the transition away from capitalism as Marx identified, institutional Open Access mandates are a regressive move. Golumbia argues that this is felt most acutely by scholars in the Humanities who have traditionally written monographs which they retained ownership rights over and received royalties for. Extending his critique to the cyberlibertarian discourse out of which Open Access emerged and the creeping Scientism that increasingly sets the terms of what constitutes academic research, Golumbia repeatedly sides with the rights of academic workers to own the products of their labor which they valorize, over and above any notion of ‘public good’, which he argues is derived “from the perspective of the consumer, and the focus on the consumer has long been a signal feature of rightist thought that subtly but strongly shifts focus away from production.” Although Golumbia does not extend his argument to the creation of co-operative universities in which members own and control the means of knowledge production as well as the outputs of their intellectual and manual labor (Winn, 2015a), his essay shows that Open Access has forced a critical debate not only about intellectual property rights but also academic labor rights and the broader disciplinary context/contest that this debate takes place in: Who owns the university?

In their article, Darder and Griffiths also recognize the privileging of STEM disciplines and the concurrent metricization of the neoliberal university. Like other authors in this collection, they also focus on the intensification of work, the casualization of academic labor and the increasing alienation of academic work. Following Marx’s delineation of four types of alienation, they show how this alienation takes place through a variety of methods including the marginalization and disciplining of radical intellectuals or

‘borderland academics’. They theorize this alienation by showing how academic labor is being reconstructed principally in terms of its exchange value rather than its use value: “Rather than movement toward building a democratizing arena for academic freedom, independent thought, and genuine civic participation, the university today, more than ever, exists as an extension of market activity and, thus, an accomplice of corporate profit.” Darder and Griffiths’ response to the “estrangement” of academic labor is to defend the critical use-value of radical intellectual labor and the work of critical pedagogues, to “radicalize students’ consciousness of social life under capitalism”, and argue for the need to critically understand academic labor within the broader context of emancipatory struggles.

The final contribution to this special issue of *Workplace* is an interview conducted by Karen Gregory with Stanley Aronowitz, Distinguished Professor of Sociology and Urban Education at City University New York (CUNY). Throughout his career, Aronowitz has made significant, contributions to the field of critical labor studies and, in particular, enriched our understanding of academic labor and the changing role and purpose of our schools and universities. We approached Aronowitz in part because he was interviewed by Andrew Long for the first issue of *Workplace* in 1998, and we wanted to reflect with him on what has changed in higher education in the last two decades. We also wanted to ask him what role Marx and Engel’s work still has for the critical scholarship of academic labor. We will end here simply with a quote from Aronowitz’s interview that perhaps encapsulates the motivation behind all the academic labor undertaken for this issue of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, and we would like to sincerely thank all of the individuals involved in producing it.

Marxism, with all of its flaws, is the philosophy of capitalism. It is an analysis of capitalism updated by many scholars. It's really the only viable analysis of capitalism that we have. So, to begin with, what Marxism and what Marx himself offers is a theory of capitalism, which can be criticized but also must be absorbed or integrated into any new paradigm that we might develop.

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